EXORCISING THE GUILT OF EXCELLENCE

• RANDY L. MADDOX •
Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy
Sioux Falls College

In a recent issue of *Faculty Dialogue* ("Social Ecology and the Nominally Religious World View: Cultural Transformation or Accommodation by the Christian Liberal Arts," Spring-Summer 1987, No. 8, pp. 99-122)—Jeffrey P. Schloss suggested that Christian liberal arts colleges abandon the rhetoric of "academic excellence" in favor of the concept of "competence in academics."[1] He advances two reasons for this suggestion. First, our institutions tend to conform the meaning of *excellence* to fit whatever it is we are doing.[2] Second, nearly all of our notions of excellence are highly individualistic, in keeping with the individualistic American culture which (Bellah has shown[3]) surrounds us.

What are we to make of this provocative suggestion? To begin with, we must recognize that Schloss's uncomfortableness with the category of excellence is not as rare as some might think. He simply has the courage to voice what many of us feel. As I reflect on the times when I was honored for academic achievement (excellence?), I can recall clearly that my sense of joy and self-satisfaction was *always* tinged by a sense of uneasiness, embarrassment, or even guilt. Now, as I fill the role of teacher bestowing such recognition, I notice the same reaction in my students. Indeed, at a recent meeting of Honors' Program directors of a Midwest college consortium, one of the major issues discussed (but, not solved) was how to overcome the hesitance of potential honorees or participants because of their fear of being perceived as elitist (i.e., curve wreckers, etc.).

So, Schloss is not alone. Allan Bloom argues that such uncomfortableness with academic excellence, based on charges of elitism and individualism, is the current reigning American attitude.[4] As such, one is left wondering which is really most open to the charge of *conforming* Christian education to the surrounding culture—the rhetoric of academic excellence or uncomfortableness with such rhetoric.

Perhaps the way around this impasse is to examine more closely the underlying concern which gives rise to our uneasiness with *academic excellence*, seeking its legitimate point while highlighting some misleading conclusions that have been drawn from it.

Behind Schloss's suggestion that individualism permeates our typical concepts of excellence lies, perhaps, the crucial recognition that none of us can excel independent of our inheritance from and the continuing support of others. We do not excel in a vacuum. However, I would suggest that this uneasiness about affirming excellence is, at a deeper level, an expression of a distinctively American sense of egalitarianism.

At the heart of our American identity is the confession that all human beings are created equal. This faith is also at the heart of the Christian tradition (which is where the Enlightenment and our founders got it from even if they didn't cite their source). As such, it is clear that schools devoted to Christian higher education in America should affirm this fundamental equality of all persons.

What is not clear, but is often assumed, is that the selection of some individuals for special honor and opportunity because they are particularly gifted in the area of intellectual activity undermines such equality. To acknowledge that there are differences in intellectual ability is assumed to imply differences of worth; i.e., elitism. To avoid such apparent elitism, our tendency in American education has been to reject any special tracks for the intellectually inclined or gifted student.[5] We have established equality by bringing the top students down to the level of the majority. (And, thereby, set these students up for harassment as "curve wreckers").

Ironically, we do not make the same assumption in other areas of life. Consider, for example, sports. When have you heard it argued that a particularly gifted athlete should not be encouraged to develop himself or herself to their fullest potential (and should not be rewarded with large scholarships or

salaries)? Such development is generally assumed to be for the good of the team, not a detriment.

Why then do we tend to fear the recognition and fostering of academic excellence? Apparently it is because we forget the context of the team. That is, we apparently assume that academic recognition is primarily for the purpose of distinguishing and exalting the person so honored, at the expense of all the "average" students. If this is the case, then Schloss's accusation of individualism and the more common charge of elitism are clearly on target.

However, maybe something else is going on in recognition of academic excellence (or, *should* be going on)—something the French tried to capture in the phrase, *Noblesse Oblige* (giftedness carries responsibility!). Maybe the purpose of recognizing the special academic abilities of some students is not to exalt them at the expense of others but to acknowledge their giftedness and to seek to cultivate it *for the good of others*. As Bellah has suggested, perhaps the most promising way to overcome the individualism of American life-styles is to recover a sense of calling that anchors each of us—with our particular gifts and needs—in community.[6]

Obviously, this suggestion is not without its own potential dangers. The most troubling of these dangers is that of paternalism. Does not the public recognition of giftedness and accompanying call to use that giftedness in service of the larger community lead inevitably to senses of superiority and inferiority on the part of the "giver" and "receiver" respectively? Clearly it can and often has. But, need it do so?

An instructive example in this regard is the situation Paul faced in the church at Corinth.[7] At the heart of the problems that were tearing this church apart was that of the role and place of gifts in the community. Apparently, several members had decided that some gifts were better than others because these gifts set their recipients apart as more *spiritual* or *spirit-filled* than the rest of the community. They appeared to favor the word *pneumatika* (spiritual things) for these gifts—a word that carried such connotations in the surrounding Greek religious culture.[8] When they wrote Paul asking for his advice about the struggles in their church, one of the most subtle but important responses Paul made was to use consistently an alternative word for *all* gifts (whether spectacular or not)—the word *charismata*. At the root of Paul's alternative designation is the Greek

word for grace: *charis*. As such, Paul was seeking to remind the Corinthians that any ability they might have which could be of service to the community—whether great or small, spectacular or common—was an unmerited gift of God's grace. As such, *they* should take no personal credit for it. Rather, they should seek to use it humbly and fruitfully in service to the community.

We cannot be sure how successful Paul's perspective was in solving the problems of the Corinthian church. However, its implications for our topic are clear. All human abilities should be seen as gifts of God's grace to be used for ministry to all of God's people. As gifts of grace, none of these abilities should be seen as granting greater importance or status to its recipient. Rather, they grant greater responsibility!

Given the nature of colleges as academic institutions, it is natural that we should focus the majority of our attention on recognizing and cultivating intellectual gifts. However, this does not mean that these gifts are inherently any better than the other types of gifts that are also necessary for the welfare of the Church or the world.[9] It simply acknowledges our particular, limited task in the work of God's kingdom. To abandon the process of recognizing and cultivating those in our communities who have academic gifts will not contribute to the greater health of our Christian communities, it will rob them of one more of the potential *callings* that can help us to grow up into maturity in Christ (Eph. 4).

In short, our real need in Christian colleges is not to *exorcise* our communities of the drive for academic excellence. Rather, it is to seek ways of helping our academically gifted members to realize and fulfill their calling to *exercise* academic excellence in service to God's kingdom. Examples of such service, such as Schloss's perceptive essay, provide hope that such a transformation of our dominant cultural models of individualism and elitism are indeed possible.

Notes and References

[1]Jeffrey Schloss, "Social Ecology and the Nominally Religious World View: Cultural Transformation or Accommodation by the Christian Liberal Arts," *Faculty Dialogue*, No. 8, (Spring/Summer 1987): 99-122. See pp. 112-13.

[2]This is surely the case, especially in our recruitment materials. One must wonder how every college in the Christian College Coalition can be providing "excellence" in Christian education if it is precisely their fellow members above which they are supposed to "excel."

[3]Robert Bellah, *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, New York: Harper and Row, 1985.

[4]Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. See especially pp. 28f, 228, 239f, 248-51.

[5]Bloom's book is an overstated, but clear, presentation of how this has happened in American colleges since the 60's (See especially Part III). Unfortunately, he provides few solutions to this problem and those he does provide tend to increase the distance between the humanities and the sciences in the academy. Overcoming this distance in a truly integrative way is surely one of the most pressing needs of American higher education.

[6]Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, p. 69.

[7]For background on this situation in general and our comments in particular see Ralph Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation*,. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

[8]For the Greek background to uses of this word see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol VI, pp. 334-59. Edited by G. Friedrich, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968.

[9]It should be noted that Schloss's concern about academic excellence is expressed in terms of institutions as a whole, not particular members within the institution. Perhaps one of his underlying concerns is that such a blanket affirmation of excellence fails to recognize the diversity of gifts even *within* an academic community (Not all students or teachers are called to be scholars—Thank God!). Such a failure would obviously foster again the false sense that some gifts are "better" than others.